

# Two letters and two replies on "The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi"—Part 2

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On April 3-5, 2000 the WSWs published a three-part series entitled, "The Case of Martin Heidegger, Philosopher and Nazi." Today we are posting the second of two letters criticizing the articles, and a reply by the author of the series, Alex Steiner.

To the editor,

I recently read and enjoyed Alex Steiner's article on Heidegger and the Nazis. Although there is much in this essay I would take issue with, I thought that the section that drew upon Fritzsche's *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and Time* was particularly interesting because it claimed to have successfully achieved something new and exciting; to the effect that the ideas of Being and Time were in some way an early expression of Heidegger's Nazism and of the horrors of the Third Reich. However, I have looked at the Heidegger passages that Fritzsche quotes from and which Steiner included and I have considered what the significance of these might be. Having done so I am now less than convinced that any thing theoretically new has been said. I haven't read Fritzsche's book but I am presuming that the passages that are quoted from by Alex Steiner and Fritzsche's analysis of these Heidegger passages are the "high point" of the study? Although I have nothing theoretically new to offer either, and at some considerable risk of being branded yet another Heidegger apologist, I thought it perhaps worth restating some clear intellectual boundaries that should continue to be maintained in my view and especially where, as in the case of Alex Steiner's piece, such boundaries appear to have been abused. In my view Alex Steiner's survey of the current literature on the "Heidegger case" provokes three related questions:

- (1) To what extent were Heidegger's ideas a part of the milieu in which he wrote, i.e., those of the 1920s and the Weimar Republic?
- (2) To what extent are Heidegger's ideas uniquely his own and which were shared by others, e.g., Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, and so forth?
- (3) To what extent might *Being and Time* contain material of interest to philosophers today?

This list of questions is not meant to be in any way comprehensive, in fact these are really positive and negative ways of addressing the same issues. My point in restating these is that I simply want to indicate that I don't think that Alex Steiner's intervention has been decisive with regard to these questions. What Steiner, Fritzsche and the others that he mentions have demonstrated to date is that there was a language of Weimar struggle and decisionism, (and I would hold that this language was neither exclusively the property of those on the left or right), and that Heidegger may have shared some of that language. The literature on the subject has also clearly demonstrated that Heidegger was a card-carrying member of the Nazi party and that he carried out Nazi reforms when he was in a position to do so, and with some enthusiasm. As for his qualities as a human being? This does not interest me.

What I have yet to see, however, is a clear demonstration that the

meaning of Heidegger's philosophy, and that the text of *Being and Time*, have anything in common with either the full development of Nazi ideology or with the actual policies and political direction taken by the Third Reich under the Nazis. Or even that there is any necessary connection between that text and these events. I will not attempt to answer Alex Steiner's essay in detail for I am really not qualified to answer him given my limited command of German. However, I do believe I have some idea of what an answer to some of these questions might begin to look like. For example, that the period was an extraordinary time and a tremendous trial of world-historical specificity for all concerned was widely understood at the time, and it certainly appeared to be a time for "decisions", in the view of many.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote (while the exchange rate was running at 7000 marks to the \$), about a "swinish spectacle" in Strasbourg on September, 19, 1922, (presumably while *Being and Time* was being composed some miles south):

"the youth of the town of Strasbourg crowd into the German pastry shop to eat themselves sick and gorge on fluffy, cream-filled slices of German cake at 5 marks the slice.

"In a pastry shop we visited, a man in an apron, wearing blue glasses, appeared to be the proprietor. [...] The place was jammed with French people of all ages and descriptions, all gorging cakes, while a young girl in a pink dress, silk stockings, with a pretty, weak face and pearl earrings in her ears took as many of their orders for fruit and vanilla ices as she could fill.

"[...] The proprietor and his helper were surly and didn't seem particularly happy when all the cakes were sold. The mark was falling faster than they could bake.

"As the last afternoon tea-ers and pastry-eaters went Strasbourg-wards across the bridge the first of the exchange pirates coming over to raid Kehl for cheap dinners began to arrive. The two streams passed each other on the bridge and two disconsolate-looking German soldiers looked on" (*The Faber Book of Reportage*, edited by John Carey, Faber and Faber, 1996, pp. 497-501).

The sense of impending crisis is palpable in this extract, and one is left with the impression that Hemingway's sympathies are entirely with the German baker and not with the "good fortune" and gluttony of the French, who are seen to be extracting their pound of flesh. Only a few years later the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, writing from his prison cell, was forced to reflect on the notion of Mussolini as the "modern Caesar", a term often used at that time to describe the nature and ambition of the fascist project. While Gramsci harbours no illusion that Mussolini's particular project is "world-historical" in the sense that Napoleon Bonaparte's may have been, yet he identifies the difficulty of making a decision as to the historical specificity of the movement.

"Caesarism—although it always expresses the particular solution in

which a great personality is entrusted with the task of 'arbitration' over a historico-political situation characterised by an equilibrium of forces heading towards catastrophe—does not in all cases have the same historical significance. There can be both progressive and reactionary forms of Caesarism" (Gramsci, A., *Selections From The Prison Notebooks*, L&W, pp. 219-20).

Gramsci's conclusions were ambiguous, the nature of modern Caesarism was changing and consent was being mobilised by elite groups in new ways. Nevertheless, to the modern democratic ear there is surely something unnerving in the notion that some form of "dictatorship" by a "strong personality", could be acceptable under any circumstances, whether by an individual or by a party of either the left or right. Much has changed since the 1920s and today it seems obvious that all politics must operate within the law. Although many still hold that violence is coeval with capitalist relations of production, few would see further unlawful violent action as warranted. Such was the political tumult of the 20s in Europe, one could pick out any number of intellectuals of this period and the fact is that apart from a few principled defenders of parliamentarianism, such as Max Weber and Piero Gobetti, few were prepared to speak out against violent political methods. As Gramsci himself was to discover to his cost, neither left nor right looked principally to the rule of law or to representative democracy as a system particularly suited to the times in which they lived. In short, Heidegger's apparent disregard for the norms of democratic conduct, and his support of political thuggery were relatively normal during the period and this was not a phenomenon confined to supporters of right-wing causes.

Returning to the second question and the obsession with national destiny, rebirth and "Volkish" culture. In fact, here I think that Alex Steiner and Fritzsche let Heidegger off rather lightly since Heidegger is much more explicit about "Volk" and "fate" than the passage quoted from suggests. For example, over the page from the quote on fate and Being-in-the world is the following:

"if fateful Da-sein essentially exists as being-in-the-world in being with others, its occurrence is an occurrence-with and is determined as destiny. With this term, we designate the occurrence of the community, of a people. Destiny is not composed of individual fates, nor can being-with-one-another be conceived of as the mutual occurrence of several subjects. These fates are already guided beforehand in being-with-one-another in the same world and in the resoluteness of definite possibilities. In communication and in battle the power of destiny first becomes free. The fateful destiny of Da-sein in and with its "generation" constitutes the complete, authentic occurrence of Da-sein" (Heidegger, M., *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, 1996, p. 352).

This damning passage provides a good clear example of the "Heidegger problem", here then we have all of Heidegger's most reprehensible political engagements in one passage, the *Volksgemeinschaft*, Destiny, fate and surrender, authenticity and struggle through "communication" and "battle". I bring your readers' attention to this passage because it is the most damaging that I can find in the work, and certainly it is the most concrete and unambiguous example of his mythic "Volkishness" that I can locate. (I do not have a German copy of *Being and Time*. Thus everything I have to say about it can only be provisional). Yet, we must surely ask who are the "Volk" in Heidegger's lexicon?

Heidegger was quite clear about his intended subjects, thus he said regarding "The answer to the question of the who of everyday Da-sein is to be won through the analysis of the kind of being in which Da-sein, initially and for the most part, lives". Heidegger continues, "If we justifiably stated that all structural factors of being-in-the-world already came into view by means of the previous explication of the world, the answer to the question of the who must also be prepared by that explication". In other words, in a typical phenomenological move "the who" of really "authentic" Da-sein is to be revealed by "authentic" Da-

sein itself provisionally until the end of the story. Thus the beginning or "natural attitude" is to be found in the "work-world of the handworker" and in:

"The field, for example, along which we walk 'outside' shows itself as belonging to such and such a person who keeps it in good order, the book which we bought at such and such a place, given by such and such a person, and so on. The boat anchored at the shore refers in its being-in-itself to an acquaintance who undertakes his voyages with it, but as a 'boat strange to us', it also points to others" ( *Being and Time*, 1996, pp. 110-111).

According to Heidegger the "world" is also Da-sein through the intentions of the "handworker" who made it. Thus the choice of those who enjoy this primordial relationship is of crucial significance. Any worker who relates to the world through technology, "the wind in the sails", is operating upon the world at one or more steps removed from authenticity. Thus Heidegger is not addressing the "little people" of the modern urban Nazi conurbation, the failed artist, the bank clerk, the gasoline salesman or the schoolteacher. Rather Heidegger is addressing the baker, the farmer, the bookseller and the fisherman. Heidegger has a special place in his philosophy for the provincial craftsmen who embody the rustic simplicity and purity that is "care", that which can beget really authentic Da-sein, and these types work at a pace that allows them to "know their fate". This is hardly the stuff of the high-octane Nazi state or of the rabid modernity (and social democracy) of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Rather, Heidegger's politics are more like the kind of reactionary rural conservatism promoted by the Countryside Alliance here in the UK, or other forms of rustic authoritarian conservatism. As Tom Rockmore has suggested, Heidegger is really a German "redneck".

Of course, the "other", such as the Gypsy or the cosmopolitan European Jew, are likely to be out of place in Heidegger's Alpine idyll, but political activism in defence of these provincial values is not circumscribed by anything that is said in *Being and Time*. Such a defence of provincialism might well indeed imply the need to emasculate bourgeois democracy, socialists and other working class organisations. Such a defence may even imply a need to systematically attack the culture of the European Enlightenment, but why must it entail, as Alex Steiner has suggested, the "persecution and murder of socialists" or the "persecution and eventual elimination" of alien forces in the midst of the Volk? As South African Apartheid once demonstrated, or even as recent events in the former Yugoslavia have indicated, once one accepts the perverse logic of "ethnic cleansing" there are any number of ways to solve the "problem" of the "other". They might be corralled into "reservations", or driven from their homes by intimidation and harassment, they might be refused work or have their identity papers taken from them, and so on. Of course, once such perverse logic takes hold it might appear to be a short, inevitable and terrible step to the next, as it was in the case of the "holocaust", but the fact is that there is no necessary step from that kind of political behaviour, repugnant though it might be to all decent people, to the systematic mass murder of millions of people in modern factories of death. To accuse Heidegger of such a move in *Being and Time* does not do justice to his immense philosophical labour in defence of provincialism and anti-modernism, nor to the horrors and historical specificity of the "holocaust" and its causes.

JG

Alex Steiner replies:

It is refreshing to receive a letter that discusses the relationship of Heidegger's philosophy and his politics on the terrain in which it should emerge—through an examination of what Heidegger actually wrote and did in the context of his historical situation. I welcome the opportunity to return to the text of *Being and Time* as part of this examination. That being said, the method by which you chose to weigh the relationship between Heidegger's words and National Socialism leaves us with but

another form of an apology for Heidegger.

Before plunging into the main theme of your letter you prepare the ground by relativizing Heidegger within his historical situation. The problem is that the historical situation you present is completely abstract, divorced from any consideration of the real historical developments. You simply see a “Right” and a “Left” which turn their backs to the “rule of law.” You write that “Heidegger's apparent disregard for the norms of democratic conduct and his support of political thuggery were relatively normal during the period and this was not a phenomenon confined to supporters of right-wing causes.” Your argument has the effect of *normalizing* Heidegger. By claiming that he was acting like everyone else in his historical situation, you conclude that his actions were not exceptional. This argument is a kind of magician's trick—apply it to anyone and his or her culpability disappears.

But Heidegger did not act like everyone else. Although many German intellectuals disgraced themselves in this period, others did not. A large number of German intellectuals and artists, including world-renowned figures such as Einstein, went into exile. In effect, they voted against the Third Reich in the only way they could vote, with their feet. They included Jews and socialists within their ranks as well as liberal opponents of fascism such as Thomas Mann. Heidegger on the other hand joined the Nazi party, accepted the position of rector under Nazi sponsorship, and later of *Führer* of Freiburg University. During this period he engaged in acts of political persecution against colleagues and personal rivals and became a public spokesman for the Nazi cause at international academic gatherings. Furthermore, Heidegger did not become a Nazi reluctantly, as some opportunists did, but by all accounts he was an enthusiastic party member. Do you really mean to say that such behavior is in any sense of the word “normal”? If so, then what is considered “normal” is being dictated by the lowest level of society.

Proceeding to the main body of your letter, let us examine your method as you yourself describe it. First, after acknowledging Heidegger's debt to what you call “the language of Weimar struggle and decisionism,” and acknowledging Heidegger's personal involvement in Nazism, you then make the point that I have failed to prove my case—namely that there is a deep and intimate connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his Nazism because, you claim, I have failed to present “...a clear demonstration that the meaning of Heidegger's philosophy and the text of *Being and Time* has anything in common with either the full development of Nazi ideology or with the actual policies and political direction taken by the Third Reich under the Nazis. Or even that there is any necessary connection between the text and these events?”

You make two claims in objecting to my essay. First, you insist that I have failed to demonstrate a necessary connection between Heidegger's philosophy and his politics. Second, you claim that I do not show where specific Nazi policies flow out of Heidegger's texts.

Allow me to turn the tables momentarily and put a question to you. What kind of evidence would you accept as sufficient proof that “Heidegger's philosophy and the text of *Being and Time*” is of a piece with “the full development of Nazi ideology” as you put it? In my essay, I provided a textual analysis that demonstrated this “connection.” You chose however to demand a criterion for demonstrating the connection that is in principle impossible to fulfill. You demand not only that any connection must be shown to be “necessary,” but that I must locate the specific policies of National Socialism in the text of *Being and Time*. That, I agree, would be quite a trick were it possible.

What I wrote in my essay was that the content of *Being and Time* is consistent with Heidegger's later decision to become an active member of the National Socialist Party. This does not mean that having written *Being and Time* in 1927, it was somehow inevitable that Heidegger would become a Nazi six years later. The political evolution of an individual always has a contingent element. Heidegger could have had a

philosophical transformation and turned his back on Nazism. Max Scheler, another right-wing philosopher who was active in the 1920s, did just that. During his last years of active engagement, he abandoned his previous right-wing militarist views and became a supporter of the political center in the Weimar Republic.

By insisting that the only genuine proof of the link between Heidegger's thoughts and his actions is that the former must logically entail the latter, you are preparing to absolve Heidegger's philosophy with the argument that it was merely accidentally connected to Nazism. You are however setting up a standard that goes counter to all accepted norms of historical research. This very point was made by Berel Lang, a scholar who has recently written about Heidegger's relationship to the holocaust. Replying to others who have presented arguments similar to yours, he writes:

“...I have not been claiming that Heidegger's turn to the mediating form of the *Volk*—still more to the German *Volk*,—is systematically entailed. But to impose a requirement of necessary connection or implication between the level or branches or elements of philosophical systems would ensure the failure of virtually all such systems, including the most complex or historically important among them. The relevant standard here should be—and constantly has been—one of disposition or probability in respect to positions or claims that the system either excludes or includes. In this sense the minimal claim for Heidegger's conception of the *Volk*—that it is not inconsistent with other systematic elements of his thinking—or beyond this, that it is likelier or more probable than other alternatives, claims a good deal. Must Heidegger invoke this mediating form or indeed any such form? No, but there is little among the levels of almost any philosophical system that would meet such a requirement.”[1]

Your next grievance is that my essay fails to show the connection between the “... text of *Being and Time* ...with either the full development of Nazi ideology or with the actual policies and political direction taken by the Third Reich under the Nazis.”

Here I must ask, are you imposing a reasonable criterion? I would hardly expect to find a defense of specific policies adopted by the Nazis after 1933 in a book whose theme is metaphysics and ontology written in 1927. That would simply be a bit more than the subject could bear. Ought we not be allowed to distinguish between advocating specific policies, which a book whose topic purports to be “fundamental ontology” would hardly undertake, and the broader *Weltanschauung* that is painted by this philosophy? Furthermore, there is more in Heidegger's philosophy than just a general adoption of the spirit of the radical right in the 1920s. I have previously referred to the philological work of Johannes Fritzsche, who has demonstrated a specific connection between Heidegger's philosophical oeuvres and Nazism. He has shown that Heidegger inserted certain rhetorical code words into his works whose echoes were distinctly those of the Nazis.

Were you to apply your criteria with any degree of consistency, then I think you would have a tough time demonstrating a necessary connection between Nazism and anything written in the 1920s, including *Mein Kampf*. Even Hitler did not and could not know every twist and turn that Nazism would take in the following decade, though of course the basic direction of his murderous course was clear enough. Likewise, I would maintain, the basic direction of Heidegger's thinking was already announced in *Being and Time*.

Furthermore, I think it is significant that Heidegger himself, after the period of his rectorship, interpreted his previous philosophical works, retrospectively to be sure, as having prefigured the specific politics of Nazism as it emerged after 1933. Thus, I would view Heidegger's public speeches during his rectorship period as his own concretization of the categories developed in *Being and Time* in terms of the specific policies of National Socialism. In his speech assuming the rectorship, Heidegger paints the destiny of the German University and of the German people as a whole, in terms that are recognizably both consistent with National

Socialist policies and propaganda and also echo his existential categories from *Being and Time*. One example should suffice:

“The self-assertion of the German University is the original, common will to its essence. We regard the German University as the ‘high’ school which from science [Wissenschaft] and through science, educates and disciplines the leaders and guardians of the fate of the German *Volk* as a *Volk* that knows it in its state. Science and German fate must come to power at the same time in the will to essence. And they will do this then and only then when we—the teachers and students—expose science to its innermost necessity, on the one hand, and, on the other, when we stand firm in the face of German fate extreme in its distress.”[2]

A further point needs to be made here. Although the textual evidence should be the primary source from which we formulate our judgments as to Heidegger's philosophical direction, there is no reason to limit ourselves solely to this type of material. Public and private actions recorded in the letters or memoirs of contemporaries are also legitimate building blocks for an overall interpretation. I am therefore puzzled by your facile dismissal of the activities of Heidegger the man, which hold no interest for you. Whereas I would agree that it is illegitimate to formulate an opinion on the thinking of the man solely from our knowledge of his political involvement, it does not follow that his “extra-philosophical” public and private activity is of no relevance. On the contrary, our knowledge of Heidegger's personal involvement with Nazism and his anti-Semitism provide a crucial backdrop to informing our understanding of his thinking when carefully weighed in with his philosophical works.

In this connection, I would think that a particularly important piece of evidence to assess would be Heidegger's own statement of the relationship between his philosophy and his politics, as candidly described to an old friend and recorded in his memoirs. Karl Löwith has told us that when he met Heidegger in Rome in 1936 the latter admitted that Nazism expressed the deepest principles of his philosophy as expounded in *Being and Time*. Löwith writes of his meeting with Heidegger,

“We talked about Italy, Freiburg, and Marburg, and also about philosophical topics. He was friendly and attentive, yet avoided, as did his wife, every allusion to the situation in Germany and his views of it.”

“On the way back, I wanted to spur him to an unguarded opinion about the situation in Germany. I ... explained to him that I ... was of the opinion that his partisanship for National Socialism lay in the essence of his philosophy. Heidegger agreed with me without reservation, and added that his concept of ‘historicity’ was the basis of his political ‘engagement’. He also left no doubt concerning his belief in Hitler.”[3]

Löwith's report cannot be easily dismissed. He was, prior to his exile from Nazi Germany, Heidegger's senior student and close personal friend and was more intimately acquainted with the inner thoughts of his teacher than just about anyone else. Heidegger's admission to Löwith cannot therefore be construed as simply an off the cuff remark, but one that must have been carefully considered. It is of course possible to argue that Heidegger's own interpretation of his philosophy is mistaken, but should we not at least consider it carefully? Yet you have nothing to say either about this well-known incident or any other historical action of the man you are examining.

When you do discuss the text, you claim to have found an even more damning bit of right-wing vitriol than any cited in my article. But it was never my purpose to collect the most outrageous quotations from *Being and Time*. The passages from Heidegger's work that I did cite are more than sufficient to illustrate my thesis. However, if you are looking for selections from Heidegger's philosophical writings that express his politics, there are plenty to be had. Following is a sample of some of Heidegger's more heavy-handed statements:

“Only from the Germans can world historical mediation come—provided that they find and defend what is German.”[4]

“The peril of world ... darkening ... [will] be forestalled [only] if our

nation in the center of the Western world is to take on its historical mission.”[5]

“We are caught in a pincers. Situated in the middle, our *Volk* experiences the severest pressure. It is the *Volk* with the most neighbors and hence the most—endangered—and with all this, the metaphysical *Volk*. We are certain of this mission. But the *Volk* will only be able to realize that destiny if within itself it creates a resonance ... and takes a creative view of its heritage. All this implies that this *Volk*, as a historical *Volk*, must move itself and thereby the history of the West beyond the center of their future ‘happening’ and into the primordial realm of the powers of Being.”[6]

“Reflection on the *Volk* is an essential stage.... An uppermost rung of Being will be attained if a ‘*Völkisch* principle,’ as something determinative, is mastered and brought into play for historical Dasein.”[7]

All these statements are taken, not from ceremonial public speeches, but from his serious philosophical works written in the 1930s.

Whereas your letter acknowledges the right-wing political content of *Being and Time*, you claim that there is nothing more sinister in this than a misguided and romantic defense of rural life against the intrusions of the modern world. Anyone who reads the above passages with any felicity, even if they were totally ignorant of Heidegger's personal involvement with Nazism, could hardly construe this material as evocative of sentimental attachment to the countryside and old-fashioned values. Instead of Heidegger providing us with harmless nostalgia about the mountains of the Black Forest, as you suggest, we have something more akin to a Wagnerian twilight of the gods. Only this drama is not meant for the theater at Bayreuth, but for the gallery of world history.

Your depiction of Heidegger as a harmless romantic conservative simply will not stand up to the textual evidence. You contrast Heidegger's “concern” for the rural craftsman with “the rabid modernity (and social democracy) of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.” By painting Heidegger as a conservative concerned with peasant life, you seriously misinterpret Heidegger's role within the political situation in Germany in the 1920s and 1930s. Throughout this period, there was a big divide on the right between the mainstream right-wing parties who represented big business and the Junker interests, and the Radical right, comprising the *Völkisch* groups and the fascists, whose base was among the disenfranchised middle classes and unemployed war veterans.

We know of course that by 1933 all the right-wing parties lined up behind Hitler and thereby sealed the fate of Germany, but that should not blind us to the very real ideological and social antagonisms that existed between the groups on the right. Of the many groups in the camp of the Radical right, the Nazis were by 1923, following the abortive beer-hall putsch in Munich, the most prominent. All the groups on the right shared an animus toward the working class and its political organizations, the Social Democrats and the Communists. They also were suspicious of the Weimar Republic, which to the nationalists could never be disentangled from the traitors who handed Germany over to its enemies with the signing of the Versailles Treaty.

What distinguished the Radical right and particularly the Nazis, was the firm belief in a national destiny, a community of the people “*Völksgemeinschaft*” that could only be realized by canceling the institutions of parliamentarism and modernism that had been imposed on the German people. These institutions were viewed as a kind of alien skin that had to be removed in order to recreate an ideal community bound by race and blood. The task of undoing the hated regime must be taken up by authentic heroes, cut from the same mold as Albert Schlageter. Schlageter was a member of the Freikorps, a right-wing terrorist group that carried out acts of violence against socialists and Jews. He was captured by the French authorities, who had occupied the Rhineland in 1923, convicted of conducting acts of sabotage, and subsequently executed. Thereafter he

became a martyr for the Nationalist cause. After their accession to power the Nazis established a holiday in his honor. For Heidegger, Schlageter served as the model of the authentic *Dasein* who answers the “call.” Listen to Heidegger's declamation on the subject of Schlageter, from a speech he gave shortly after assuming the rectorship of Freiburg:

“Schlageter walked these grounds as a student. But Freiburg could not hold him for long. He was compelled to go to the Baltic; he was compelled to go to Upper Silesia; he was compelled to go to the Ruhr.

“He was not permitted to escape his destiny so that he could die the most difficult and greatest of all deaths with a hard will and a clear heart.”[8]

Note that Schlageter, the authentic hero, does not so much choose his destiny as submit to a call. He does not decide to go to the Baltic, he is compelled to do so. Compare this with the following passage from *Being and Time* and in which Heidegger elaborates on his concept of the “authentic”.

“Once one has grasped the finitude of one's existence, it snatches one back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one—those of comfortableness, shirking, and taking things lightly—and brings *Dasein* into the simplicity of its fate. This is how we designate *Dasein's* primordial historicizing, which lies in authentic resoluteness and in which *Dasein* hands itself down to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has inherited and yet chosen.”[9]

Like Schlageter, authentic *Dasein* does not choose, but “hands itself down” to a “possibility which it has inherited but yet chosen.” Only authentic *Dasein* is capable of responding to the “call” and caring about the peasant and the “hand-worker”, even in the face of death. On the other hand, inauthentic *Dasein*, those who are caught up in the everyday world of the Weimar Republic, in the life of “comfortableness, shirking and taking things lightly”, turn their back on the call and are thereby condemned to a life exiled from the community of the people.

Once Heidegger's concepts of “authenticity”, “care”, the “call” are read in conjunction with an appreciation of the ideology of the Radical right the mystery disappears. Central to Heidegger and the Radical right was the concept of “cancellation”. This more than anything else distinguishes the dynamics of Heidegger and fascism from that of more traditional conservative movements. The term is a reference to the fascist counterrevolution, that which the Nazis called the National Revolution. The cancellation is not simply a return to an uncorrupted past, but it is a retrieval of the authentic community that once existed by way of the destruction of the institutions and people that have corrupted it. In that sense it is the very opposite of a Hegelian sublation, a leap to something new that simultaneously preserves what was best of the old. The Heideggerian cancellation sees nothing of value to preserve. There has been no progress leading up to the present. There has been only corruption and degeneration. The uncorrupted state can only be regained through heroic and violent actions, a baptism of fire. In *Being and Time* this conception is explicitly treated in the dramatic climax of the book.

In order to be authentic, we must retrieve the possibilities from the past, the community that has been eclipsed by the modern world. We must become heroes, like Albert Schlageter, and make a decision for that which has already been chosen for us by our heritage. Elsewhere, Heidegger says that “...the handing down of a heritage constitutes itself in resoluteness.”[10] Further on in this key section, we find the following passage:

“...repetition makes a reciprocative rejoinder to the possibility of that existence which has-been-there. But when such a rejoinder is made to this possibility in a resolution, it is made in a moment of vision; and as such it is at the same time a disavowal of that which in the ‘today’, is working itself out as the ‘past’.”[11]

It is one of the outstanding merits of the work of Johannes Fritzsche in his *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's Being and*

*Time* to have demonstrated that Heidegger's audience in Germany in the 1920s would clearly have understood his allusions to the themes of the Radical right. Fritzsche spends a considerable amount of time discussing the above passage and shows that the reference to the rejoinder which is a “disavowal” is a reference to the cancellation of the Weimar Republic and its institutions. It is not possible in this venue to repeat the details of Fritzsche's analysis. I will however provide Fritzsche's own summary of his reading of *Being and Time*, a portion of which I had previously quoted in my article:

“In *Being and Time*, Heidegger unfolds a drama in three acts, the drama of *Dasein's* historicity. In the first act the necessary conditions of the conflict are developed. In the second act, a critical situation develops that calls for a dramatic solution, which is presented in the third act.... The solution of the drama consists in authentic *Dasein* stepping out of the world in which it has been living as ordinary *Dasein*, turning back to this world, and canceling it. Authentic *Dasein* does so because it has been called upon by the past to rerealize the past, which has been pushed aside by the world in which *Dasein* has been living as ordinary *Dasein*. The rerealization of the past requires that authentic *Dasein* cancel, destroy, or disavow the world it has been living in as ordinary *Dasein*. Ordinary *Dasein* is living in a downward plunge.... At some point in the downward plunge the second part of the drama begins, and a buzzing in the air ... indicates a crisis. The solution of the crisis lies in the cancellation of the downward plunge and the world of ordinary *Dasein* so as to make room for a world in which the past and its principle are revitalized and properly present.”[12]

If Fritzsche's reading is correct, and I believe it is, then the Heidegger of *Being and Time* is clearly in the camp of the most extreme elements of the Radical right in the 1920s. Even if you claim not to be convinced by this interpretation of *Being and Time*, what possible room is there for misinterpretation of Heidegger's writings, public speeches and actions in the 1930s, when he demonstratively threw in his lot with the Nazis? Was he still being a romantic rural conservative then? Your contention that Heidegger was a “redneck” is merely another variation of the theme defended by legions of Heidegger's apologists, from Hannah Arendt to Richard Rorty—that Heidegger was politically naïve when he joined the Nazis and simply got in over his head. I discussed this absurd thesis in my essay at great length. Your letter adds nothing to lend it any credibility.

In conclusion, I would urge you to ponder the remarkable situation that philosophy faces at the dawn of the twenty-first century. Martin Heidegger, who was an active and unapologetic Nazi, has been widely acclaimed as the most important philosopher of the twentieth century. I have stated elsewhere that I do not share this enthusiasm for Heidegger's work. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Heidegger has been and continues to be one of the most influential thinkers of the past century. To date, there have been perhaps a thousand volumes of commentary on Heidegger published in the English language alone. This is by far more attention than any other modern philosopher has received.

The most influential philosopher of the twentieth century a Nazi? Does this not point to a deep crisis within philosophy itself? It is time to stop making excuses for Heidegger, and confront this crisis.

#### Notes:

1. Berel Lang, *Heidegger's Silence*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1996, p. 53.
2. Martin Heidegger, “The Self Assertion of the German University,” *The Heidegger Controversy*, Sheldon Wolin, editor, MIT Press, 1998, p. 30.
3. Karl Löwith, “My Last Meeting with Heidegger in Rome, 1936,” Wolin, pp. 141-42.
4. Martin Heidegger, *Heraklit*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 55, Frankfurt am Main, Klosterman, 1979, p. 149. (cited in Lang)
5. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph

Manheim, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1959, p. 123.

6. Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Philosophie*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 40, Frankfurt am Main, Klosterman, 1983, p. 41-42. (cited in Lang)

7. Martin Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 65, Frankfurt am Main, Klosterman, 1989, p. 42. (cited in Lang)

8. Martin Heidegger, Schlageter (May 26, 1933), *The Heidegger Controversy*, edited by Sheldon Wolin, MIT Press, 1993, p. 42.

9. *Being and Time*, p. 435.

10. *Being and Time*, p. 435.

11. *Being and Time*, p. 438.

12. Johannes Fritzsche, *Historical Destiny and National Socialism in Heidegger's 'Being and Time'*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999, p. x-xi.



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